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Rank Intersectionality and *Othello*

Abstract: As a crucial concept in critical theory, intersectionality satisfies a need within global Shakespeare reception studies. The reason for this is the way it permits cross-currents between conceptions of race and gender in particular; it also allows for an awareness of the historical and cultural location of the audience or reader as distinct from the moment of the production of a particular play. It is therefore fundamentally dynamic and can be further extended via discussions of rank, sexuality or religion. This essay argues for the importance of a lively approach to intersectionality that integrates concerns of race and gender in *Othello* with social rank in Shakespearean Venice and Cyprus. The article deliberately eschews a psychological analysis of character, insisting that a sense of inwardness, that these stage figures should somehow be treated as though they were real people, is a much later, modern preoccupation. Instead, the play is treated as not only early modern but pre-modern. This is also why there is no treatment of class as such; that too is a much later modern category that carries all sorts of baggage, anachronistic and otherwise. Class is not a sophisticated enough notion to account adequately for the permutations in a society that was obsessed with tiny gradations in rank, dignity and honour. Beginning with reference to Toni Morrison's conceptualization of modern American literature as predicated on a constructed whiteness, the essay moves by analogy back towards Shakespeare's drama to the structured interplay between gender, rank and race that is this play. Althusser's sense of interpellation is revived in order adequately to describe how these positions work to emplace Othello and Desdemona in order to open up the play to a global perspective that accounts for multiple possibilities. The article therefore goes well beyond the old familiar groupings so beloved of character-based criticism, instead insisting on the primacy of social definitions of the positions available to the personages in the play.

Keywords: colour, Desdemona, Othello, Toni Morrison, rank, whiteness.

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Shakespeare Studies seems to attract waves of critical attention that relate to the interests of a group or school of writers. It might seem this has been true at least since the "theory wars" of the 1980s, as theorists inflected forms of Marxism, deconstruction, poststructuralism, feminism and more. Another way to look at it, however, is that "Shakespeare" has always been a centre of gravity for critical writing, theorised or otherwise. The only other area of English literary study that perhaps approaches his weight—and the weight of tradition associated with him—might be Romanticism. This is not to reduce the importance of studies that concentrate on modernism or contemporary writing, but instead to point to the central, indeed ideological importance, of the bard and also the Romantic tradition that helped cement his prominence. The confluence is salutary; it is certainly not accidental.

Perhaps one of the most important and longer-lasting effects of the ferment of the 1980s has been the postcolonial turn in Shakespeare Studies, literary theory, and critical theory more generally. In Britain, the moment produced *Alternative Shakespeares* (Drakakis 1985) and *Political Shakespeare* (Dollimore and Sinfield 1985), with both being published at almost exactly the same time. These collections each included an important early foray into a recognisably postcolonial Shakespearean subject, essays concentrating on *The Tempest*. Paul Brown's essay in *Political Shakespeare* (Brown 1985) is less well known than that by Francis Barker and Peter Hulme in *Alternative Shakespeares* (Barker and Hulme 1985), but his title echoes Prospero's discursive and ideological positioning of Caliban as "mine." There is a reason for going over this relatively recent history: Kim F. Hall's subsequent development of this work itself echoes Brown's title, and her book has been critical for post-colonial Shakespeare Studies especially because, as indeed is signalled in her sub-title ("economies of race and gender in early modern England"), she elaborates upon the conjunction of race and gender in the period—inaugurating what we might recognise now as intersectional studies (Hall 1995).

Almost contemporaneous with Kim Hall's work is a trilogy of essays on the whiteness of the American literary imagination by Toni Morrison, published slightly earlier in 1993. The book is a version of three lectures in which she investigates the symbolically central role of blackness to American literature even and especially when its creative texts are resolutely white. Now of course this is a much later cultural formation than that of Shakespearean drama and one would not wish to elide, obfuscate or erase historical specificity. However, the discourses by which the emerging British Empire begins to define itself over and against other cultures mark plays such as *Othello* as inevitably racially charged; so much, so obvious. In effect, then, Morrison treats the play as a notionally foundational text. More precisely, however, the mechanism by which the empire completely refuses to acknowledge that other cultures do exist, especially in supposedly "undiscovered" lands, is the ancestral ideology for the literary

manoeuvres discussed by Morrison. In a long but crucial paragraph, she includes a comment on the process of differentiation that lies behind the establishment of the American literary canon. Unlike the European experience, she writes that in America:

> There was a very theatrical difference underfoot. Writers were able to celebrate or deplore an identity already existing or rapidly taking a form that was elaborated through racial difference. That difference provided a huge payout of sign, symbol, and agency in the process of organizing, separating, and consolidating identity along culturally valuable lines of interest. (Morrison 39)

There is an enormous amount of information here, modulated by means of a subtle, writerly vocabulary, style and choice of words. The later American experience has an added element that was not so certain in Shakespeare's time: the large black "underfoot" population. In this respect, another resource is ready to hand in addition to the inheritance of European discourses of empire and Morrison is exceptionally careful to show that the result is a deliberately constructed set of racial differences. She uses a vocabulary, almost itself an invisible undertone, of capitalist financial imperatives to drive home her point; as her final sentence suggests, there comes a "huge payout […] along culturally viable lines of interest." American literature is therefore whitened in concert with the power practices of American commerce in its relentless drive to profit.

It might seem odd at this juncture to relate her points back to Shakespeare, perverse even, in a way that would probably appeal to the topsy-turvy carnivalesque pre-modern world of Shakespearean drama. However, what is perhaps even more telling is Morrison's strategic use of the term "theatrical": why does she incorporate a gesture towards theatrics in an essay on literature? Perhaps the ghost of Arthur Miller can be glimpsed, since she is dealing with the literary imagination that lies behind (and lies about) the constitution of the American Dream, a bare whiteness that leads to tragedy because it is everyone else's nightmare. Especially if one comes from any of the resolutely excluded categories: the indigenous nations; black people; women; immigrant Poles, Irish, Chinese, or Italians for sure; the planet—the list is almost endless. Morrison is too sophisticated a writer for the allusion to drama to be incidental or accidental. What she is doing, therefore, is characterising the process of what she names "Africanism," with its attendant echoes of Orientalism, as a dynamic that is structurally tragic because it is socially produced.

Her analysis demonstrates why American literature is assumed somehow to be white, male and (mostly) middle class. Universities run courses in African-American, Chinese-American, Latin-American, Latina-American, or native-American literature, to name just a few—and one only has to peruse the

jobs lists on sites like the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to see the variations.[1] But does anyone run courses on White Male American Literature? That is the default setting and because it is white it is invisible. Or, rather, it has been constructed as invisible because it is assumed to be "natural;" Morrison's whole book is an exercise in demonstrating how it came into existence as a historically and culturally specific entity.[2]

Silencing the Canon

In the abstract, it is possible to take a step back from the historical moment for which Morrison is writing to note that she is interrogating the formation of the literary canon. Her focus is of course on the systematic uses and abuses of colour as opposed to, say, a denigration of supposedly minor genres or genders. The paragraph quoted above begins by questioning the moves made by literary critics and their colonisation of the curriculum in the universities has been a crucial factor in deciding what is somehow "good" literature, in both senses of the word. At the pinnacle is the constructed edifice of the Bard of Avon, wee Willie Shakespeare, whose prominence bears no resemblance to his fortunes during his own lifetime and silently passes over the fact that he seems to have made a fortune of his own. By analogy, therefore, critical race studies on Shakespeare adopt some of the same strategies as Morrison does in relation to the later American canon. Revealingly, they encounter many of the same fundamental structural problems (Smith 2016).

In her Introduction to the recently published Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race, Ayanna Thompson describes changes that have occurred in the representation of Cleopatra. She concentrates on the Queen of Egypt as a touchstone for attitudes towards racially aware study amongst academic Shakespeareans, and this clears the way for her to describe her volume:

> Challenging the usefulness of the generic category of "Other" through the book's disaggregated chapters on Moors, Turks, and Jews, it presents an intersectional approach with other chapters that focus on the concepts of sexuality, lineage, nationality, and globalization. (Thomson 4)

The topics opened up by the intersectional moment allow for a multiplicity of interpretations and ideological investigations that go well beyond the purview

[1] Faculty Positions jobs (chronicle.com). Accessed 31 August 2024.

[2] The foundational position ascribed to Shakespeare's play sees appropriate creative development in Morrison's play *Desdemona* in which she gives a voice to the marginalised nurse Barbary (Morrison).

of a traditional criticism that purports to speak for all, but which in fact closes down the play of meaning and the powerful operations that lie behind it. As Alan Sinfield writes, "It is essentialist humanism, not cultural materialism, that has the narrow view of human potential" (Sinfield 79). A form of criticism that claims to be universal but which in its actual practice polices meaning and interpretation is at best an ideological fiction.

In a somewhat different context, Ato Quayson provides a similar history of postcolonial developments in Shakespeare studies. At the beginning of a chapter on *Othello* in his book *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature*, Quayson turns quotations from *Shakespeare Reproduced* and *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory* into epigraphs for what he is about to say. Not only does this position his writing in relation to earlier theorised criticism, it also enables him to negotiate between the Renaissance past and the postmodern present:

> As the two epigraphs to this chapter show, whether from a popular cultural or theoretical perspective, the return to Shakespeare is never only about the Elizabethan contexts in which his plays were first produced. It is also about the familiarity of Shakespeare in terms set by the worlds in which he is being reread. But what might it mean to turn to Shakespeare for some clues about cosmopolitanism? It is now perhaps not controversial to state that multiethnicity has been a central part of the human experience since the historical inception of cities. But the concomitant observation that multiethnicity does not signify the social acceptance of strangers would also be completely in order. (Quayson 44-45)

Quayson's project in this particular chapter, entitled "Ethical Cosmopolitanism and Shakespeare's *Othello*", places the play firmly within the cross-cultural milieu of the premodern city. Venice operates almost as a test case, a city limit which is for Europeans in the period the metropolis *par excellence* for relations of ethnicity and, in Quayson's formulation, many more cross-currents including rank, gender and sexuality. He therefore identifies this play, together with *The Merchant of Venice*, as a crucible not only for contemporary Renaissance representations, but also for subsequent cultures and periods. *Othello* holds a position of peculiar importance for a popular playwright who will later be canonised as the ultimate literary figure. In this respect, his use of the word "reread," seemingly unimportant, takes on an extra significance in its own right. Shakespeare needs to be remade into the canonical literary figure by means of a process that removes him from his roots in premodern performance culture. It is this procedure that, in effect, Quayson wishes to interrogate by means of two of the most important plays that have been used to re-place Shakespeare.

Such was my Process

The figure of Othello is therefore best understood as an ideological fiction, a dramatic construct, rather than somehow a fully coherent, realised character with individualised psychology. He is not and cannot be a real person, at least on his own stage. Shakespeare's period predates the full rise of individualism, so in historical terms, it simply makes no sense to define him in accordance with its dictates. The old question about Iago's motivations is an extremely obvious case in point but another way of dealing with the absurdity of psychological characterisation on that stage is to ask a different question: what about Othello's motivation?

The passage often referenced to show Othello's command of poetic discourse early in the play comes at: 1.3.129-147.[3] It is completely contradicted by his later collapse but there are far more compelling reasons to rethink it. First of all, there is the performance premise: the speech is (obviously!) designed to be delivered on the Renaissance stage. That was not the same situation as in a modern proscenium setup. Surrounded by the audience and members of the cast, the figure of Othello is not only the centre of attention and the centre of the gaze, he is envisioned from multiple perspectives: a plurality of differentiated gazes. This formation is about to be repeated when Desdemona arrives, in effect putting them on trial one at a time. Othello's performance is, therefore, precisely that: a performance. But it is performed for the ears of his peers, both onstage and offstage audience, and his speech clearly references a performative, rhetorical purpose that he calls a "process":

> It was my hint to speak—such was my process—
> And of the cannibals that each other eat,
> The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
> Do grow beneath their shoulders. This to hear
> Would Desdemona seriously incline. (1.3.129-147)

In semantic terms it is not clear which aspect of his performance is in process: was it the prior progress of his life story or is it the moment at which he elaborates on that story to Brabantio and Desdemona? This doubled possibility shows a theatrical self-referentiality of exactly the kind that can be found in countless plays from the period: these actors are well aware of the dramatic fictions being created and the words they use draw attention to the process of representation. To treat Othello for a moment as if he were a real person, the question would be whether he is telling the truth or not. Looking at him in

[3] All references to the plays are taken from Proudfoot et al (2021).

the stage moment of reiterating his retelling to the high council of Venice, another question arises: is he telling people what he knows they want to hear?

Taking his speech as a deliberately contrived process of embellishment permits a recognition that nothing in it is at all original. So why should we assume that his earlier utterances are somehow more fundamentally truthful than the language associated with his later descent into madness? Othello is inhabiting a pre-conceived discourse, one that is familiar to Shakespeare's contemporaries in the form of the so-called "discoveries." As long ago as 1934, J. Milton French noted the discursive roots of Othello's discourse, listing correspondences between the play and contemporary writings about the discoveries in rather exhaustive detail. Not only is there a long tradition of this sort of writing stretching all the way back to Pliny the Elder, but as French realises, there is a renewed geographical interest for Shakespeare's contemporaries (French 807). In other words, to return to a more modern language, the figure of Othello always already inhabits a pre-existing Western discourse, one which Toni Morrison would certainly recognise as 'Africanist'. So it is once again worth asking whether Othello's speech is truly truthful. Perhaps he is instead seizing the moment and telling these people what he knows they want to hear, couching it in terms they will find instantly recognisable even as they romanticise them. He finishes by saying "This to hear / Would Desdemona seriously incline" (1.3.146-147) and then admits that he responded by redoubling his efforts to gain and keep her attention. In other words, it is possible to reconfigure Othello as a dramatic persona who has an agenda, much like the other characters on that stage—he functions to embody a certain kind of discourse. Rather than seeing his poetic utterance as somehow truly authentic, then, it must be possible at least to imagine him as inhabiting a rhetorical subject position. This variation points to ways in which Othello makes use of the colonialist imagination.[4]

It is worth remembering in this context that performing Othello can be an extremely difficult task if the basis for it is coherent character psychology and subjectivity (as opposed to the Renaissance subject). If Othello must be performed as sympathetically truthful both when he is in complete control and when he loses the plot, then there is a serious issue for enacting that role on a modern stage for which it was never designed. Actors need to be good at both sides of his "personality," and it is not easy to find a "classically" trained modern Shakespearean actor who can do both to the audience's satisfaction. This is not the end result of some difficulty with the character's psychology. It is

[4] These points could be further elaborated with reference to Othello's final speech at 5.2.338-356. As Sinfield realises, Othello here resituates himself within an imperially constructed discourse as he reworks an Orientalist vocabulary. The terms of the language pre-exist any sense of his individuality.

a symptom of the extreme difficulty of rendering this figuration in terms that make sense for a much later culture obsessed with the supposed truthfulness inherent in effective characterisation. Shakespeare's characters predate method acting and the caricature acting question "What is my motivation?" is indeed most irrelevant.

The play can be difficult to reproduce satisfactorily on the modern stage for these reasons, so a production that takes Othello's role seriously has to find a way around the central problems posed by this play for the modern audience's (and actors') common obsession with character psychology. This could be accomplished by means of displacement, shifting the burden onto the figure of Iago. The modern proscenium stage does not easily lend itself to the kinds of interaction with the audience that are so common in Renaissance drama, but if Iago can be made to manipulate the audience just as he manipulates Othello, then his position as a crucial go-between extends to the audience's relationship with the onstage action.

In a somewhat different context Arthur Little has investigated the anxieties of performance in relation to the complex stagecraft required by this play:

> Othello is made to create the ocular proof that legitimizes an audience's guarded response to his blackness. Like the fictions about bestiality or homosexuality evoked or generated by the play, blackness is never literal in *Othello*. If anything, blackness figures as the ocular sign of a cultural need to create and destroy monsters: create them so that they may not create themselves; destroy them so that they may not procreate or multiply. In the nascent imperialism of early-seventeenth-century England, this process is not merely birth control but ideology control. (Little 86)

There is a great deal of tragic theory behind this passage. First of all, Little places Othello into the passive—he is "made," he does not somehow exist as a fully realised individual. In other words, he is constructed and positioned. He functions to figure forth meaning, which is why Little is able to write that blackness is never literal: not only is it performed, it is coded to enact a whole series of culturally specific expectations. His next sentence is in fact an exceptional definition of the role of tragedy: as a social form it creates monsters in order that they might be expunged from the body politic—the ancient scapegoat model of tragic form. He even uses the term "process", exactly the same word Othello utilizes to describe how he himself inhabits ideology. In the next few pages Little builds on these observations as he discusses the "blackface" tradition, noting that the various choices of skin colour available to productions are always inevitably overdetermined. In a sense, there is no way out regardless of the skin colour choices made by a production of the play, a succinct definition of the power of ideology.

Ideological Fictions

Desdemona is also an ideological construct that functions to figure forth an exceptionally precise location and subject position. The mechanistic language here is deliberate because, as with Othello earlier, it helps to defamiliarize subjectivity, depersonalising her to denote her alienation from modern assumptions about psychology. It is well worth thinking about the way "she" works on stage and in the text by abstracting the process of her composition. She constitutes a classic moment for an intersectional discussion, so much so indeed that it is possible to move beyond this particular play to a wider, more rounded consideration of just how many of Shakespeare's plays can be reworked via intersectionality (Thompson 4). In *Faultlines*, Alan Sinfield makes a similar postcolonial move when he rehearses an Althusserian interpellation of the figure of Othello:

> So, in the last lines of the play, when he wants to reassert himself, Othello "recognizes" himself as what Venetian culture has really believed him to be: an ignorant, barbaric outsider—like, he says, the "base Indian" who threw away a pearl. Virtually, this is what Althusser means by "interpellation": Venice hails Othello as a barbarian, and he acknowledges that it is he they mean. (Sinfield 31)

As noted previously, Othello inhabits the nascent discourses of Western imperialism, even and perhaps especially when he is at his most commanding. It is very tempting to suggest that he is powerful and effective precisely when he accords most closely with the dictates of the colonialist enterprise, when he "recognizes" his position within it, identifying with it. This provides another way around the problem posed by his characterisation: he is a subject of Western imperialism both when he is in control and when he is not, two sides of the same mercantilist coin. The contradictory difficulties posed for modern performance by this stage persona are therefore not at all rooted in psychology. Instead, they are symptoms of an epistemological break, to use a vocabulary associated with theorists such as Althusser and the ways Sinfield references him. In terms that would be familiar to Shakespeare's culture, there is in fact no contradiction at all in the roots of Othello's behaviour because both major elements of his performance are already catered for by the dominant discourse. He is positioned—"made" to repeat Arthur Little's suggestive term—in order to enact a fundamental tragic dilemma. Since tragedy is ineluctably social and not psychological for at least several more centuries, this play sets up what Sinfield would call a fundamental faultline in Western imperialist ideology: Othello figures as a manifestation of that faultline. He must be represented as *both* necessary to the functioning of the Venetian war machine *and also* an untamed

savage at heart; he has to be civilised and uncivilised.[5] In other words, what the play does in classic Aristotelian manner is to put these two contradictory requirements of the social order in conflict with each other. This is a far cry from sympathetic character criticism, but it does a far better job of accounting for the problems posed by *Othello* in particular in modern performance: this pre-modern play is predicated upon a historically and socially precise set of premises. It is not centred on the individual.[6]

It would of course be eminently possible and reasonable—in at least two senses of the word—to use this observation as a starting point for a wide-ranging investigation of the acceptance of such a process of subjugation across Shakespeare's output. However, that is not the intention in the present essay. By remaining with *Othello*, the plan now is to suggest how an intersectional approach shows the ways in which the figure of Desdemona is positioned ("interpellated") in accordance with a powerful need to define what such a woman means, in effect as an operation of containing "her" propensity to independent, and thus unconstrained, action in "her" own right.

There is a reason for constantly putting references to Desdemona into inverted commas: "she" is not only a fiction, "she" is, of course, a man. To return temporarily to another man's incorporation (or personation, to use the suggestive Renaissance term) of a female role, the figure of Cleopatra raises

[5] Othello's doubled position can be related even to the origin of his name, about which there is still some debate. A cursory internet search throws up what seems to be a standard derivation, a kind of diminutive form of the name of the Emperor Otho; see Othello: names—The Bill / Shakespeare Project (thebillshakespeareproject.com), last accessed 15 June 2023. The similarity is explained by means of the two figures' suicides, although it is admittedly tenuous at best. The lack of determination for the name of Othello marks him as somewhat displaced or perhaps not fully defined. I am grateful to Professor Manfred Malzahn of the United Arab Emirates University for an observation that the name has possible Greek associations, from one of several verbs relating to desire. This is interesting because of course the Ottoman Empire had famously taken Constantinople in 1453, an event with far-reaching consequences not only for the Renaissance European imagination, but political and military history. For the importance of the island of Cyprus as itself a liminal space in the ongoing struggle between Venice and the Turks, see MacCrossan 2020.

[6] It seems to me that Western European cultures subsequent to Shakespeare's period, especially the elitist criticism that developed and was given its impetus in the Anglosphere by the Romantic conception of the great creative genius, depend for their force very much on individualism. A materialist criticism will point out that this ideological formulation post-dates Shakespeare's plays, and that to impose it wholesale on his works is obviously anachronistic. It is this conception of historical specificity that lies at the heart of the cultural materialist position adopted and constructed by critics such as Alan Sinfield. On issues of the misreading and complete misunderstanding of Aristotle, see Eagleton (77) and Liebler (20-22).

similar issues to those of Desdemona. Bill Worthen notes that the doubled perspective afforded by the contemporary male performance of such roles produces a multiplicity of potential meanings because of "[…] the representation of 'character' that his roleplaying seems to convey" (Worthen 295). I have discussed this operation elsewhere but it is worth reiterating here that Cleopatra is not just a doubled figure, but subsumes a range of performance possibilities (Innes 2015, 97-98). She encapsulates the Macedonian/Greek Ptolemaic Queen who performed the role of Egyptian ruler when required to do so. She also quite literally incorporates the misogynistic and racist "othering" operation of a long Western imperialist tradition that goes back to Virgil's *Aeneid*, which seeks to deflect attention away from Octavius Caesar's murderous civil war against other Romans by making it look as though the forces of Marcus Antonius were mostly foreigners from the east. Hence Shakespeare's inherited and coloured language about her. She is also, of course, embodied by a man, which activates multiple potentialities in performance: an awareness of her doubled bodily nature; a suspension of disbelief; a movement between both—and probably all three at various times.

The same could be said for Desdemona. She is defined several times by different men before she ever comes anywhere near the stage. What she means is multiply inflected in ways that depend on the perspective of whichever man is speaking at the time. Iago, Roderigo, Brabantio and Othello all act as though she is the centre of attention, and the only thing that seems to stop a wholesale descent into civil strife is the external threat posed to the mercantile and colonial interests of the Venetian state by the Turkish fleet. When he is accosted by Desdemona's splenetic father and his household, Othello comments wryly:

> How may the duke be therewith satisfied,
> Whose messengers are here about my side
> Upon some present business of the state. (1.2.88-90)

This leads in turn to the famous Desdemona "trial" scene in which she is almost arraigned before the Doge (Shakespeare calls him the "duke") in full council. As discussed previously, while the men are all waiting for her arrival, Othello is afforded an opportunity to give his side of the story after Brabantio splutters about charms and witchcraft because it is the only possible thing he can think would win over his daughter: "to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou" (1.3.70-71). Nobody present on the stage even thinks to comment on this racist dehumanising of Othello, which the audience already recognises as part of the same politics of definition already activated by Iago. True, this could be due to very few of the men present having enough confidence to contradict him due to Brabantio's high social status, but it obviously functions as an ingrained racist mode of behaviour. The Duke certainly says nothing in response. It is

also possible that an extra dimension of rank is provided by the olfactory connotations of the term (Steingass 40).

Othello and then Desdemona are permitted to speak before the highest authorities in the state; neither does so from anything other than the position of a subject. Desdemona's arrival punctuates her husband's delivery, operating on the level of theatrical performance as a stage interruption. An alert company will have been using the tensions dramatised in the first three scenes of the play to draw the audience's attention to what this woman might mean—or rather, be made to mean. A deconstructionist move here would be to note how her arrival is constantly deferred, so preparing the audience for her eventual entry. After all, if everyone is so engaged with what this woman represents for the various men who have been defining her, what is she actually going to be like in person?

Sinfield picks up the issue rather adroitly in *Faultlines* in a chapter entitled "When is a character not a character?" He is interested in what we might call an effect of characterisation: these roles consist of enough psychological material to be recognisable as people on the stage. But no more than that, because for Sinfield and other materialist critics, it is not enough simply to assume that such personae have the supposed coherence of real people. He notes that the powerful resonances produced by Desdemona early in the play do not sit at all easily with her insipid willingness to let herself be killed by her husband at the end; he sees a similar inconsistency with Lady Macbeth, and she doesn't even get the grace of an onstage death. By conceiving of both characters in effect as subject positions rather than as fully realised individuals, he suggests that: "Desdemona is a disjointed sequence of positions that women are conventionally supposed to occupy" (Sinfield 53). The subtext here, of course, is that once again a later culture's assumption of individuation is historically dubious when it comes to these dramatic fictions from an earlier age. Also, although he does not state the case in quite these terms, the implication is that for a Shakespearean play, the plotline has priority, not the characterisation. This makes Shakespeare's drama resolutely Aristotelian in its logic, because Aristotle has almost no time at all for ideas of characterisation in Book VI of the *Poetics*, regardless of what a bunch of poorly educated Shakespeare critics might like to think; character is subordinate to plot in these instances. Aristotle even goes so far as effectively to suggest that characterisation is irrelevant. In his Preface to the version on Project Gutenberg, Gilbert Murray writes:

> The fact is that much misunderstanding is often caused by our modern attempts to limit too strictly the meaning of a Greek word. Greek was very much a live language, and a language still unconscious of grammar, not, like ours, dominated by definitions and trained upon dictionaries. An instance is provided by Aristotle's famous saying that the typical tragic hero is one who falls from high state or fame, not through vice or depravity, but by some great *hamartia*.

> *Hamartia* means originally a "bad shot" or "error," but is currently used for "offence" or "sin." Aristotle clearly means that the typical hero is a great man with "something wrong" in his life or character; but I think it is a mistake of method to argue whether he means "an intellectual error" or "a moral flaw." The word is not so precise. (Aristotle)

The Greek term carries associations that are akin to "pollution," understood much more as a socially produced ritualistic definition, than some sort of "sin" or "stain" pertaining to an individual. The fact that Murray knew this over a hundred years ago now makes one wonder why Shakespeareans can still assume differently: classical scholars must think we are all mad, or at least appallingly educated; for Aristotle, the plot's the thing.

A properly Aristotelian approach to a figure like Desdemona therefore helps draw attention to the ways in which her position is constructed. Indeed, she notes this herself when she says: "I do perceive here a divided duty" (1.3.181). This is pretty much the first thing she says when she finally appears on the stage and has the opportunity to speak, after 459 lines of frenetic business about her, conducted entirely between men. It is difficult to imagine a more precise definition of Aristotelian *hamartia*, as she specifies in her first utterance in the play that she is caught between two impossibilities. Since there is in Aristotle no such thing as the supposed internalised tragic flaw so beloved of traditional Shakespearean criticism, she denotes with exceptional precision a socially produced dilemma that is extrinsic to her; it is enacted upon her. In this respect, it is tempting to say that there is no such thing as the tragic flaw at all in Shakespearean characterisation, properly understood.

So much so, indeed, that the play goes to extraordinary lengths to position her both discursively and performatively at this critical juncture. Althusser notes in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" that: "[…] you and I are *always already* subjects, and as such practice the rituals of ideological recognition" (Althusser 263). The position ascribed to us, and which we recognise implicitly, is in fact designed for us prior to our own material existence. In other words, it is a preconstructed subject position and this is exactly what is recognised in the almost judicial dramatization of Desdemona's dilemma in *Othello* 1.3. Althusser's reference to ritual makes his theorising of the operation of ideology especially useful to the discussion of that most socially ritualistic of forms, tragedy. In fact, it is possible to be even more precise in performative terms, because this problematic fiction is rigorously interpellated by the law of the father, indeed the law of the state. Yes, Desdemona does speak about the reason she has "revolted," to use a term that is applied to her twice during the play by men: Roderigo at 1.1.132 and Othello at 3.3.191. However, she is given permission to do so by the head of the state, in a situation that earlier was characterised almost as an arraignment. Visually, this woman is on

her own, entirely surrounded by men, and is being required to defend herself. She has violated the pre-existing economies of race and gender (to recall Kim Hall's phrasing) because not only has she chosen for herself, she has chosen an outsider with a different skin colour. In other words, the woman's role is central, and not only to the business of the stage, but to contemporary society as a whole.[7]

The preceding argument demonstrates why intersectional study is crucial. It allows us to recover some of the meanings that, as Ayanna Thompson suggests in her Introduction mentioned above, have been at least occluded, but much more likely utterly suppressed, by a long-standing critical tradition.[8] There is more to be said, however, because inflecting intersectionality via Althusser requires us to think of other major elements that go into the construction of such a subject position. If we are going to avoid a too easy, and in fact rather facile, "reading" of character as somehow constituted in accordance with what Althusser would call the bourgeois subject, then it follows that we need to identify the elements that constitute a materially conceived English Renaissance subject position. The obvious thing to do would be to bring in categories of class; however, that term is difficult because not only does it have its own loaded associations—its ideological baggage, if you like—from a later period, it is also too blunt a term to help us manage the precise intricacies of the operation of Renaissance subjection. As Ulysses is made to say in a well-known speech in *Troilus and Cressida*, this is a society that conceives of degrees of order, hierarchy and rank in exceptional detail, and it goes without saying that his rhetoric is not exactly neutral (*Troilus and Cressida* 1.3.83-137); as a king in his own right, his speech is predicated upon the requirements of an aristocratic conception of right order. Couched as a statement, it is in fact an ideological imposition. All this comes in a play famous for its axiomatic rendering of the feminine subject as: "This is and is not Cressid" (5.2.153) and one might as well say, this is and is not Desdemona—or Lady Macbeth, for that matter. Because "she" both is and is not. Desdemona must accordingly be considered in terms of social rank as well as the intersection between gender and race; she operates as

[7] There is not the space in this article to delve in detail into the documentation that survives from the period regarding the social stratification of gender roles, and of course this is not a history essay. Historians such as Susan Amussen in her book on gender and class in Early Modern England have investigated these topics in great detail, by making use of contemporary documents (Amussen). In a chapter on the gender order in families and villages, she discusses multiple legal cases that showcase gendered familial anxiety regarding the position of women (95-133) in terms that we would now recognise as intersectional.

[8] For a fuller discussion, see Loomba, especially the Introduction. She elaborates on the case of Blake Modisane's experience of South African apartheid. She relates the experience of this writer and actor directly to *Othello*.

a site of contradictory interplay between different discourses, including the performative, as noted above.

Given the seductive euphoria of the intersectional moment, it is easy to forget, or perhaps marginalise, the sheer importance of rank to people in Shakespeare's period. We need to remind ourselves that these various possibilities function to define the subject position of this woman on the stage. A fundamental faultline, to repeat Alan Sinfield's useful term, runs through Shakespeare's plays—comedies and tragedies—because he keeps harping on heiresses. Desdemona, Lady Macbeth, Katherina and Bianca, Cordelia, Goneril and Regan, Juliet, Hero, Beatrice, Olivia, Portia and Portia (to name but a few) all have this one thing in common: they are upper-class heiresses. The intersectional needs rank and this fundamental faultline is what is enacted in the arraignment of Desdemona. She is surrounded by men and she is also enacted by a man; it is difficult to imagine a more precise rendering not only of the masculine or male gaze, but of the process of subjection itself. This is why her father reacts with such vitriol to his inability to keep her under control; he fails in his social duty as an aristocratic patriarch.

Conclusion: Liminal Spaces and The Intersectional Subject

It is worth remembering in such fraught circumstances that when Desdemona explains her position to the assembled nobility of Venice, not a single woman is actually present on that stage. The same can be said of another figure who transgresses masculine authority, but this time in a supposedly comedic trial scene: Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. Her very name is redolent of the masculine subjection of women, in that it defines her as a liminal space. She is the doorway or gateway to wealth for Bassanio, and it is worth imagining ways that she can be played as a positive possibility for women as she probably manipulates him into marriage in the casket scene. Perhaps she spots a husband she can control.

Venice is something of a vexed case on the English Renaissance stage, because of course the playwrights' versions of the city are inflected by English concerns and assumptions about an Italian city they basically considered to be the ultimate cesspit of corruption, in every sense of the word.[9] In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia is inevitably enmeshed in this web of associations and it must

[9] In this respect it is worth recalling Richard Dutton's analysis of the social world of the Venice of *Volpone* (Dutton 94-108), with its attendant details of glass-blowing, ball games and handkerchiefs—which directly relates to *Othello*. Dutton focuses on the ways in which sexual behaviour is central to Jonson's representation of Venice and the same can be said of Shakespeare's Venetian plays.

be remembered that she is the one who reinforces that play's resolution of the Shylock plot in another famous trial scene equivalent to the "trial" of Desdemona in *Othello*. There is not the space here to continue with this line of reasoning, since it would require a full essay-length treatment in its own right, but it is worth repeating that an intersectional methodology needs to incorporate a politics of rank. The reason why so much destruction is wrought in the tragedy is the social standing of Desdemona as an upper-class heiress. As Brabantio's vitriolic rhetoric demonstrates, the patriarchal economy dictates that she be controlled, subjected, but it is the liminal figure of Othello who actually—but only temporarily—gains the prize. He is the necessary outsider, needed by the Venetian state because of his prowess and who is, indeed, a more powerful military commander since he is not Venetian. His structural location is similar to that of Macbeth, the great warrior from the margins who does all the dirty work while the king resides safe and sound in his court: in that play, Duncan never leads an army and neither does the Doge of Othello's Venice. The difference is that as a nobleman in his own right, Macbeth achieves an internally strong position in ways that are unavailable to Othello (Innes 2011). The Scot's position is intrinsic to the social fabric, while Othello's is extrinsic.

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